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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002828

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: ATTACK AT TURKISH COUNCIL OF STATE ROILS
SECULAR/ISLAMIC TENSION

(U) Classified by Ambassador Ross Wilson, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The May 17 attack by a gunman on Turkey's staunchly secularist Council of State killed one judge and left four wounded, greatly heightening tensions between Turkey's secularists and Islamists. The gunman attacked the Council of State's second banc, the same court that issued a February decision banning teachers from wearing Islamic headscarves on their way to work. Secularists are portraying the attack as part of a broader assault on secularism by the ruling pro-Islam Justice and Development Party (AKP) government; AKP is portaying it as the work of a lone unbalanced gunman with strong nationalist ties. How the government deals with this sensitive internal issue in the coming days will be key. End Summary.

¶2. (U) On the morning of May 17, a 29-year old lawyer named Alparslan Arslan opened fire in a Council of State courtroom in Ankara, wounding five judges, one of whom died that afternoon from head wounds. Media report that witnesses say Arslan yelled Islamist epithets during the incident, including "God is great", "We are the soldiers of God", and "the headscarf decison does not match God's justice".

¶3. (U) All senior level officials, from the President to Chief of the General Staff, the speaker of Parliament, the Prime Minister and opposition party figures, have strongly condemned the gunman's act. The Council of State, where the attack occurred, is Turkey's final instance for review of administrative court decisions; it is also the first instance for certain administrative issues.

¶4. (U) The Council is also a bastion of Turkey's secular establishment, which quickly swung into action. Staunchly secular President (and former head of the constitutional court) Sezer and two generals paid condolence visits to the Council in the afternoon to onlookers' applause. Turkish Chief of the General Staff, General Ozkok, sent the Council President a condolence message, condemning the attack. Main opposition secular People's Republican Party (CHP) Chairman Baykal linked the attack to AKP government attitudes on the headscarf and characterized it as part of a wider plot to increase political assassinations. Secular protests in front of the Council building continued late into the evening of May 17. The secularist establishment - to include judges,

university rectors and faculty, and NGO representatives - is gathering the morning of May 18 at Ataturk's mausoleum, Anitkabir - the country's temple to secularism.

¶5. (C) The AKP government is sitting in crisis session today; FM Gul had planned to travel to Istanbul late May 17, but cancelled his plans in order to participate in deliberations with PM Erdogan and other senior government officials. Individual AKP members are portraying the incident as the work of a lone unbalanced gunman. PM Erdogan characterized as "ugly" attempts to link the incident to the headscarf. He had, in February, criticized the Council of State decision that banned teachers from wearing headscarves on their way to work. The Islamist press is focusing less on the attacker's Islamist credentials and more on his nationalist bent.

¶6. (C) The assailant apparently has both Islamist and strong nationalist ties. CHP Vice Chairman and staunch secularist Onur Oymen told us May 17 that he understood the gunman's ideology was a mix of Islam and nationalism, which pointed to the need to keep religion completely separate from government. An AKP MP told us late on May 17 that according to the Istanbul Bar Association, of which Arslan is a member, Arslan has a history of mental illness and recently lost a case in the Council.

¶7. (U) Media and secularists were quick to link the attack to a spread of the judges' photographs which Islamist paper "Vakit" published after the Council of State's headscarf decision, marking these particular judges as responsible. Department spokesperson McCormack's condolence statements played in a number of papers.

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¶8. (C) Comment: What This Is and What This Isn't: This shooting does not/not mean that Turkey is about to descend into crisis. It does herald a marked escalation of secular-Islamist tensions - something already on the table, but now in much sharper focus. Peculiar to Turkey are the assailant's apparent strong nationalist ties, which make this more than a purely Islamist versus secularist issue. What PM Erdogan's AKP government does and doesn't do over the coming days will be key. The government has opportunities - at the Anitkabir event, at the slain judge's funeral this afternoon, and over this weekend - a key Ataturkist/secular holiday - to make strong statements. The opposition has already made it clear that it is loaded for bear, and certainly views this as an opportunity to strike back at what it sees as creeping Islamization. A minority of voices regard this as a straightforward murder and warn against politicizing the attack. End comment.

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